MUSCULAR MOVEMENT IN ITS PRACTICAL APPLICATION

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An Address by

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MUSCULAR MOVEMENT IN ITS PRACTICAL APPLICATION

I have wondered a good many times since Miss Spaulding invited me to speak at this meeting why on earth I accepted her invitation. I am reminded of a colored lady's conversation over the telephone one day. The following conversation ensued: "May I axe you a question?" "Sartainly." "Will you marry me?" "Sartainly. What a foolish question to axe, and, by the way, who air you?"

I don't know as I need to ask who Miss Spaulding is, but I ask myself why I accepted. I wonder if she mesmerized me, or whether it was because I did not know enough to say "No." I get so used to saying "Yes" to some people.

The fact of the matter is that I have long been deeply interested in the subject. At the time the Syllabus was prepared, penmanship teaching was threshed out by teachers, principals and superintendents, until finally a more or less satisfactory compromise was agreed upon. Most of the work in the Syllabus is a compromise anyway, representing the views of many. As you read along in that Syllabus and notice what is said in reference to penmanship, you might infer, and properly so, that if we were to write it again, we would modify our suggestions on all subjects very

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materially. No doubt, here, you would be able and willing to give us a good many points. At that time we did not have any special help in this particular subject.

Personally, I was one of the most reluctant in our system to drop the vertical. I had believed in it for a long time, because of the fact that it had two good qualities—ease and legibility. It lacked, however, the element of speed. Business men were not satisfied with it. While the vertical seemed to me to be an improvement over the Spencerian slant and it was the best on the market, I had to yield at last and say that there was something better. When Mr. Palmer came East and argued with us in reference to his method, we felt that he had a system well worth a trial. One of the characteristics of the New York schools is that the teachers are willing to give any method that appears to have merit in it a trial. Practically every text-book in print is in our New York schools. I like the freedom that is given to experiment, working on the theory that there are very few things definitely settled in the educational world.

We often speak of the "three R's", and, of course, we always include writing as one of the three "R's." Everybody is obliged to write. What a man's business is makes no difference; he is obliged to write a great deal, even in the midst of typewriters and stenographers.

I go back to my early years when I taught in a district school in Vermont. I remember that one winter we had a great deal of rivalry in our penmanship work, because the superintendent of schools, an old gentleman who had taken a great deal of interest in the subject of penmanship, had offered prizes to the different schools showing the greatest proficiency and the greatest improvement. I have never been able to boast of my penmanship, as you know. I could not write then, but I was determined to awaken an interest in the subject. I had some pupils who wished to enter the competition. We made penmanship a serious business. One element of success in any work, is to make a serious business of it. One prize was to be given to the school that made the greatest improvement. The theory was that in order to measure progress, we should see what we did at the beginning and what we were able to do later. I remember that I wondered how one of the schools made such wonderful progress. I quietly made inquiry, not of the teacher but of some of the pupils. I asked them how they had made such progress, and finally it leaked out that the first few specimens were purposely written in a very slovenly manner. They understood that progress was the one thing that must be shown. They gave poor work on the first effort, and thus in their Yankee shrewdness demonstrated great progress.

One of the greatest objections to copy-books was indicated in a school in this city which I once visited. The principal, one of the noblest men in the profession, was a fine penman himself, and was proud of it. I noticed in the copy-books that he had fine work right along, class after class; in truth, the penmanship in the copy-books was of a high order. He took a great deal of pride in it. But when I said to him one day, "Your writing is abominable," he said, "Do you mean the writing in this school is abominable?" I said I did, and he at once produced those sets of copy-books. I said, "That looks well enough, but just think of the labor used in doing the work, and the meager results attained. My test is what pupils do in letter writing and in the arithmetic, spelling and other written tests. Take up any set of papers in any class in your school, and tell me frankly if you think that the penmanship is creditable." He said that he judged largely from what the pupils could do in copy-books when under good supervision. There was the greatest difference possible between the work in those copy-books and the work in the other written exercises. Each pupil took from thirty to forty minutes on a half page of six lines in the copy-books. Then when practical application of writing was made, it was anything but creditable.

I feel that the meager results attained by copy-books had much to do with the cutting

out of all copy-books here in New York City. The only objection to mentioning the "Palmer Method" was the charge that might be made that we were giving the one house a monopoly of the trade. We therefore dropped all copy-books, and then permitted the teachers to decide on the system of muscular movement as best they could. Of course, the pressure was strong from many sources not to drop copy-books. I do not believe, however, that these will come back. We are getting much better results without them.

I notice that we have in our Syllabus 100 minutes per week for writing in the first year, 125 minutes per week for the second and third years, 75 minutes per week in the fourth, fifth and six years, and no time mentioned for writing in the seventh and eighth years. We have made some brief suggestions in regard to the study of form, handling of material, ease in arm movement, the blackboard and paper, spacing, etc. It is a question in the minds of many whether the inch spaces should be followed. I would not if I thought I had a better way. The Syllabus gives the general trend, but teachers should not hold literally to everything there. I think that it is not sensible in this large sysem with a school population greater than the entire population of any other city except Chicago and Philadelphia, and fifty per cent. larger than the school population of the whole State of Massachusetts, to try to

show in one small Syllabus what should be done in all sections of the city—the lower East side, the West side, and the suburbs. We do not expect anything of the kind, and the teachers who think we must do this are making a mistake; they are not using good sense.

I notice in the Syllabus that there is no mention made of rapidity in penmanship until the sixth year. It was our thought then that pupils should pay no attention to speed at first. I think, however, that we are all convinced that speed should come earlier.

In our training schools, we have penmanship in the first year; I am sorry that we haven't it throughout the course, for at least one period each week. The other day I saw something of the work of the students in the New York Training School. I saw some beautiful work. I asked a young lady if she could write anything like that when she began. She said "Not a bit, nothing like that." She was very emphatic. I have a feeling that if we could get all of our coming teachers in the training schools to give at least a period a week during the course to this muscular movement, we would have something at the close of the school course that we would be proud of.

The business schools of New York are popular because the pupils who come from them write well. Business men must have good penmen. We ought to have thorough training in penmanship in our public schools as a part of

the regular course, even if thereby it is necessary to abbreviate some line of work in English.

Miss Rector, in Public School No. 4, Manhattan, has the credit of getting in early, and doing work in penmanship that is remarkable. I have often been down there to get test exercises. Some have said, "Oh, well, she gives so much time to it. She is giving two, three, or four times as much as others do, and is holding up all other studies for the sake of penmanship." This, Miss Rector says, is not so —that she gives only the time allowed by the Syllabus. However, I do not believe a person will lose in other studies by giving emphasis to penmanship, as good penmanship is a great labor-saving machine, helping students to write faster and do much better work in other lines.

Another illustration—I know a young man who passed his examinations for a high school license successfully, very largely on the strength of his penmanship; he is gifted in expressing himself with his pen. I believe the Board of Examiners, trying to be as just as possible, must look with greater favor on a nicely written paper, than upon a sloppy paper. It is well worth while to take a great deal of time in penmanship until one can write just as easily as these little girls can (referring to the class that had been taught by Mr. Lister). All girls and boys ought to have

much practice in free muscular movement.

One of the features I especially like in this system in that they who teach must undertake the work in the spirit of a learner, and master it themselves, though some teachers feel that they can teach just as well without learning it themselves. And, furthermore, it is a satisfaction to be able to do creditable work in penmanship. I do not know how much money I would give if I were a good penman, but it would be considerable. When teachers demonstrate to pupils their mastery of the subject, many of them will be inspired to make the effort. It certainly is a great encouragement to the children to see the teacher do what she wishes them to do.

I saw a letter the other day from one of the superintendents in New Hampshire. He said that he had required all his teachers to secure Palmer certificates; that retention of their positions depended upon it. In this place the penmanship throughout the grades must be good. And one of the teachers was sixty-five years of age! We can thus see what people can do if they will.

Again it appears to me that if the teacher is to master the subject and make a success of it, she must give time to it, and the class must give time to it. If the children are poor in it, it is perfectly proper to take time from other subjects temporarily. If I were a principal, I should insist upon this.

Mr. Palmer's pamphlets on penmanship are much better than they used to be, in that they give specific instructions to teachers. I have been reading the little red book and noticed how much better it is—how much stronger Mr. Palmer himself has grown. I have no doubt he is getting just as much out of this work from year to year as any of you are.

From an educational or any other standpoint, we need some one who can take the work of teachers, criticize it, and return it to them with directions for future practice. Many of us felt that we needed another supervisor, but the school authorities felt that they could not afford it. Mr. Palmer has done this work of his own accord, has given a great deal of time to it, and deserves credit therefor.

But there is one thing we ought to have. In this city there ought to be greater uniformity. We ought not to have half a dozen different systems. If this system is right, it should prevail.

I wish to make one or two criticisms. I was in a school the other day where a good teacher of penmanship was missing the idea of the count. I watched him count, and I watched the pupils count. I watched the pupils as they wrote with their own counting, and noticed that they paid no attention to the counting, not one of them. I asked the teacher, "Did you notice that there was scarcely any one paying attention to the counting?" He said that he

had not noticed it. It seems to me that counting is a splendid thing if the children follow it. In this case the teacher was neglecting one element of considerable importance.

One of the most discouraging features in this work is the wretched appearance of the penmanship for the first few months. I suppose that this is one of the most discouraging features to all teachers. And many drop it, because for a time the penmanship is not as good as it was at first.

In a country school in Massachusetts, a plan was followed that worked well. The teacher had regular writing exercises during the week, but on each Friday afternoon she had the whole school write a certain paragraph from dictation. On every Friday, for twelve weeks, the pupils wrote the same paragraph of eight or ten lines. I studied the work from week to week to see the improvement, and I noticed remarkable results. If a child writes the same word over and over again, in a single sentence, and writes well, he is prepared for other written work. It is not so much the quantity as the quality. Ease, legibility and speed follow hand in hand.

In his briefer psychology, Professor James quotes from Bain on the subject of habit training:

"First, launch yourself into the habit you aspire to gain with as strong and decided an initiative as possible.

"Second, never suffer an exception until the new habit is securely rooted in your life.

"Third, seize the very first possible opportunity to act on every resolution you make, and on every emotional prompting you may experience, in the direction of the habits you aspire to gain.

"Fourth, keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day."

These four maxims followed in penmanship will inevitably make a success of this, as it will of anything else.

My main thought in coming here this afternoon is to encourage you teachers. I wish to see greater interest in this subject that is so vital, that is of so much practical value, that will help the boy or girl to make a living, and to engage in business successfully and profitably.

I say simply this: So far as I have seen it in the schools where it has been thoroughly tried, we are getting splendid results, and to certain schools I am proud indeed to point and say, "That is what we are doing under normal conditions in our schools, where teachers and pupils are interested."

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